

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-14

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EB-08 H-02 INR-10 IO-14 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05
SP-02 OC-06 CTME-00 DUMY-00 SS-15 ICAE-00 USSS-00
SY-05 FAA-00 WRDE-00 MCT-01 SCS-06 PA-02 ICA-20
/114 W

-----011682 180717Z /11

R 161851Z MAY 78
FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8027
INFO AMCONSUL CALI
AMCONSUL BARRANQUILLA
AMCONSUL CURACAO

UNCLAS SECTION 1 OF 2 BOGOTA 4613

E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: CASC, PINS
SUBJ: HIJACKING OF AVIANCA FLIGHT 163; WRAP-UP REPORT

1. SUMMARY: HIJACKING ON MAY 11, 1978 OF AVIANCA FLIGHT NO. 163, HALFWAY BETWEEN POINT OF ORIGIN IN SANTA MARTHA, COLOMBIA, AND SCHEDULED LANDING IN BOGOTA, ENDED SEVEN HOURS LATER WITH CAPTURE OF THE TWO HIJACKERS IN CURACAO. ALL 5 PRESUMED AMERICAN CITIZENS ON BOARD ESCAPED UNHARMED DURING STOP IN ARUBA. THE MOTIVE OF HIJACKERS WAS PROBABLY MONEY AND NOT POLITICS.

2. INFORMATION FROM COLOMBIAN AUTHORITIES IS STILL FRAGMENTARY, BUT POLICE, CIVIL AVIATION, AND AVIANCA OFFICIALS CONFIRM THE ESSENTIAL ACCURACY OF RADIO AND NEWSPAPER REPORTS OF THE HIJACKING. EMBASSY OFFICIAL SPOKE BY PHONE ON MAY 13 WITH JAMES EDWARDS, A PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER, ONE OF FIVE PRESUMED AMERICANS ON BOARD WHO ESCAPED FROM PLANE IN ARUBA. CONFUSION STILL EXISTS AS TO THE BACKGROUND OF THE HIJACKERS, THEIR PURPOSE, THEIR INTENDED DESTINATION, AND THE EVENTS
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DURING THE LAST FEW MINUTES BEFORE THEIR CAPTURE.

3. ON MAY 11, 1978, AT APPROXIMATELY 12:10 (BOGOTA TIME), TWO MEN, ONE REPORTERDLY ARMED WITH A TOY PISTOL AND A HOMEMADE NITROGLYCERIN BOMB, HIJACKED AVIANCA FLIGHT #163, BOEING 727, COLOMBIAN AIRCRAFT REGISTRATION #HK-727, A SCHEDULED FLIGHT FROM SANTA MARTHA TO BOGOTA WITH

NO SCHEDULED INTERMEDIATE STOPS. FLIGHT #163 LEFT SANTA MARTA ON TIME AT 11:40 CARRYING 133 PASSENGERS AND CREW OF 6. ACCORDING TO AVIANCA OFFICIALS, PRESS REPORTS, AND PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER EDWARDS, THE HIJACKING OCCURRED APPROXIMATELY 30 MINUTES FLYING TIME FROM SANTA MARTA.

4. COLOMBIAN POLICE POSITIVELY IDENTIFIED THE HIJACKERS AS GILBERTO BLAS HERNANDEZ AND JOSE LUIS CASTILLO PEREZ, BOTH 19 YEAR OLD COLOMBIANS. REPORTS TO DATE INDICATE THAT CASTILLO TOOK AN ACTIVE ROLE IN THE HIJACKING. THE ROLE OF BLAS HERNANDEZ IS STILL UNCERTAIN. AVIANCA AND POLICE OFFICIALS STATE THAT HIJACKERS BOARDED PLANE IN SANTA MARTA WITH TICKETS PURCHASED UNDER ASSUMED NAMES, BUT THESE OFFICIALS WERE UNABLE TO PROVIDE NAMES ON TICKETS OR HOW AND WHERE TICKETS PURCHASED. COLOMBIAN POLICE OFFICIALS HAVE NOT YET ESTABLISHED ANY PREVIOUS RECORD OF CRIMINAL OR EXTREMIST POLITICAL ACTIVITIES BY THE HIJACKERS.

5. AVIANCA AND CIVIL AVIATION OFFICIALS STATE THAT PREBOARDING SECURITY PROCEDURES AT SANTA MARTA REGULARLY CONSIST OF A HAND SEARCH OF PASSENGERS' CARRY-ON LUGGAGE. EDWARDS SAID THAT THIS SEARCH WAS CARRIED OUT FOR THE PASSENGERS OF FLIGHT NO.163 AND THAT THE SEARCH WAS MORE THOROUGH THAN OTHERS HE HAD UNDERGONE PREVIOUSLY WHEN DEPARTING FROM SANTA MARTA.

6. NEW STORIES, BASED ON INTERVIEWS WITH PASSENGERS AND UNCLASSIFIED

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CREW, REPORT THAT THE TWO HIJACKERS SAT IN THE LAST ROW OF SEATS ON THE PLANE AND THAT CASTILLO WENT INTO A RESTROOM AND EMERGED WITH A HANDKERCHIEF COVERING HIS FACE AND WITH A GUN IN ONE HAND AND A BOMB IN ANOTHER. THEY SAY THAT THE BOMB WAS CONCEALED IN A PAPER BAG, WITH THE WICK SHOWING, AND THAT CASTILLO KEPT A LIT CIGARETTE IN HIS HAND TO DEMONSTRATE HIS READINESS TO DETONATE THE BOMB.

CASTILLO SEIZED A STEWARDESS, PRESSED THE GUN TO HER NECK, AND FORCED HER TO TAKE HIM TO THE PILOT'S CABIN, WHERE HE THREATENED TO BLOW UP THE PLANE IF IT DID NOT TAKE HIM TO CALI FOR MORE FUEL AND THEN TO ARUBA. CASTILLO THEN SENT THE STEWARDESS BACK TO THE PASSENGERS' CABIN TO OBTAIN A .38 REVOLVER FROM A CUSTOMS OFFICIAL ON BOARD. WHEN SHE RETURNED WITH THE UNLOADED PISTOL, HE SENT HER BACK FOR THE BULLETS. SOMETIME DURING THE FIRST FEW MINUTES OF HIJACKING (THE PASSENGERS ACCOUNTS DIFFER AS TO THE EXACT SEQUENCE OF EVENTS), HE ADDRESSED THE PASSENGERS OVER THE INTERCOM, TELLING THEM THAT HE AND HIS COMRADE BELONGED TO A GROUP OF ORPHANS, THAT PERHAPS SOME OF THE PASSENGERS HAD BEEN RESPONSIBLE FOR KILLING THE MOTHERS OF THOSE ORPHANS, AND THAT HE INTENDED TO USE MONEY GAINED FROM THE HIJACKING TO HELP THE ORPHANS. PASSENGERS REPORT THAT HE SPOKE SPANISH WITH ACCENT OF COASTAL COLOMBIA.

DURING THE FLIGHT TO CALI, HE ALLOWED THE PILOT TO COMMUNICATE HIS COURSE BY RADIO, BUT NO OTHER DETAILS OF THE HIJACKING. MEANWHILE, HE KEPT THE .38 REVOLVER AIMED AT THE FLIGHT ENGINEER.

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-----011762 180716Z /11

R 161851Z MAY 78
FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
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7. AT 12:59, FLIGHT NO. 163 LANDED IN CALI. CASTILLO REQUESTED FUEL AND, ACCORDING TO PRESS REPORTS, 44,000 POUNDS OF FUEL WERE PLACED ON THE AIRCRAFT. HE ALSO REQUESTED AND RECEIVED MAPS OF THE CARIBBEAN AREA. HE ALLOWED A WOMAN, ACCOMPANIED BY A BABY AND SMALL CHILD, TO DEPLANE. ACCORDING TO AVIANCA OFFICIALS, HE DEMANDED BY RADIO THAT AVIANCA PAY HIM 2 MILLION COLOMBIAN PESOS (ABOUT \$52,000 US) WITHIN 24 HOURS OR HE WOULD BLOW UP THE PLANE.

8. AT 13:49, FLIGHT NO. 163 LEFT CALI FOR ARUBA, WITH THE SAME RESTRICTIONS ON COMMUNICATION WITH THE GROUND REQUIRED BY CASTILLO DURING THE FLIGHT TO CALI. UPON ARRIVAL IN ARUBA AT 15:23 CASTILLO DEMANDED MORE FUEL, BUT THE PLANE WAS NOT REFUELED. HE ALSO REQUESTED THAN BETWEEN SIX AND TEN UNIFORMED COLOMBIAN POLICE OFFICIALS, ON BOARD AS PASSENGERS, DISEMBARK. WHEN THEY DID SO, APPROXIMATELY 20 MORE PASSENGERS, INCLUDING ALL FIVE PRESUMED TO BE AMERICAN CITIZENS (EDWARDS, MAUDE POWERS, HIS GRANDMOTHER, JAMES PHILYAW, JAMES MCCLOY, AND DANIEL RICHARDSON) LEFT THE PLANE. EDWARDS STATES THAT HE TOLD CASTILLO THAT MS. POWERS HAD HEART PROBLEMS, AT WHICH
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POINT THE HIJACKER TOLD HIM AND MS. POWERS THAT THEY COULD DEPLANE. SUBSEQUENTLY, CASTILLO ASKED THAT FOOD AND DRINK BE PLACED ABOARD FOR THE CREW AND REMAINING PASSENGERS. HE ALSO ASKED FOR THOSE MAPS NECESSARY FOR A FLIGHT TO CUBA. THE FLIGHT ENGINEER BROUGHT THE FOOD AND DRINK ABOARD, BUT FOR NO APPARENT REASON, THE HIJACKER SHOT HIM IN THE LEG. AFTER FORCED THE PILOT TO TAKE-OFF FOR CURACAO AT 16:55.

9. EDWARDS REPORTS THAT AVIANCA FOUND ACCOMODATIONS FOR ALL PASSENGERS WHO ESCAPED IN ARUBA AND THAT AVIANCA THE NEXT EVENING FLEW THEM TO BOGOTA. HE STATES THAT ARUBA OFFICIALS DID NOT QUESTION HIM OR THE OTHER AMERICANS INVOLVED IN THE INCIDENT.

10. FLIGHT NO. 163 LANDED IN CURACAO AT 17:16. THERE, LOCAL AUTHORITIES NEGOTIATED SUCCESSFULLY WITH CASTILLO A TRADE-OFF IN WHICH THE PLANE WOULD RECEIVE 25,000 POUNDS OF FUEL IN EXCHANGE FOR THE FREEDOM OF THE PASSENGERS. A FEW MOMENTS AFTER THE NEGOTIATIONS HAD BEEN CONCLUDED, BUT BEFORE THE TRADE-OFF COULD BEGIN, A FEW PASSENGERS ATTEMPTED TO DEPLANE. PRESS REPORTS ON ENSUING EVENTS DIFER. IT IS POSSIBLE THAT A STEWARDESS DISTRACTED CASTILLO BY OFFERING HIM COFFEE. HE WAS DISARMED BY A PASSENGER OR CREW-MEMBER, ATTACKED BY CREW MEMBERS AND PASSENGERS, AND THEN ARRESTED BY CURACAO OFFICIALS, WHO REPORTEDLY ARRESTED BLAS HERNANDEZ AS HE TRIED TO DEPLANE WITH THE OTHER PASSENGERS. A FEW PASSENGERS CLAIMED THAT AT LEAST ONE OF THEM WAS ACCIDENTALLY INJURED BY CURACAO POLICEMAN ON DEPLANING AND THAT AT LEAST TWO CURACAO POLICEMEN WERE INJURED AND THE PLANE WAS SLIGHTLY DAMAGED DURING UNNECESSARY GUNFIRE BY CURACAO POLICEMEN. PLANE WAS QUICKLY REPAIRED AND FLEW TO COLOMBIA ON MAY 14, 1978. THERE WERE NO OTHER INJURIES IN CURACAO.

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RADIO REPORTS STATED THAT AT THE TIME THE HIJACKERS WERE CAPTURED, AVIANCA OFFICIALS WERE TRYING TO PERSUADE THE HIJACKERS, THROUGH CURACAO OFFICIALS, TO RETURN WITH THE PLANE TO COLOMBIA TO CONTINUE NEGOTIATIONS ON DEMAND OF TWO MILLION COLOMBIAN PESOS, A REPORT AVIANCA'S DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS WOULD NEITHER CONFIRM NOR DENY.

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